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# *Experiences of using the researching professional development framework*

Article

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### **Experiences of using the Researching Professional Development Framework**

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While Doctorate in Education (EdD) courses have been around for some time, supporting frameworks have tended to be based on traditional PhD routes of study, with the unique development needs of part-time students (who are often working full time and undertaking research into their professional context) often being ignored. In order to fill this gap, we recently proposed a new framework - the Researching Practitioner Development Framework (RPDF) - which was specifically developed to support EdD students by offering them an opportunity to reflect on key areas of their professional development as they progress through their studies. They do this by drawing upon the descriptions of experiences provided by other EdD students and graduates and use their reflections on these to generate their own Researching Professional Development Plan for the forthcoming year. The purpose of this article is to report on a longitudinal study which explored the perceptions and experiences of part-time doctoral students using this framework as they progressed through the first year of their EdD programme at a research-led English University. Following an initial questionnaire completed by students and supervisors (n=18), six participants were interviewed at three key points in the programme: beginning, middle and end. The findings suggest that students found the RPDF had been of particular value early in their studies and had helped students realise that they were developing their identity as researching professionals, ready to make a difference to professional practice through their research.

**Keywords:** Doctorate in Education (EdD); professional doctorate; researching professional; professional development framework; academic identity-trajectory

## Introduction

In a previous article (Lindsay, Kerawalla, and Floyd 2017), we proposed a new framework - the Researching Professional Development Framework (RPDF) – which aimed to support EdD students as they progressed through their studies. However, we acknowledged that there was a need for the framework to be tested empirically and signposted that research was planned which would,

...evaluate the implementation of the RPDF in terms of how it is used by EdD students and how well they feel it supports their professional development and research impact in their workplace (Lindsay, Kerawalla, and Floyd 2017, 13).

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to report on this research and explore these highlighted issues.

The motivation behind the development of the RPDF arose from the perceived key differences between a Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) and a Doctorate in Education (EdD). Students undertaking a PhD will often undertake this directly after previous study and it may well lead to a career in academia. Students undertaking an EdD, or indeed any professional doctorate, will usually be mid-career experienced professionals. The professional doctorate provides ‘processes of thoughtful action, leading to advances in practice, rather than processes of research leading to advances in knowledge’ (Lester 2004, 765). Unlike the PhD, the EdD consciously brings together the domains of practice and research with a complex interaction between the two. EdD study leads to ‘research which is expected to lead to personal and professional development and is grounded in practice’ (Burgess and Wellington 2010, 163). While the PhD can be seen as creating **professional researchers**, the EdD in contrast helps develop **researching professionals** (Bourner, Bowden, and Laing 2001, Butcher and Sieminski 2006).

Supporting frameworks for doctoral researchers have tended to be based on traditional PhD routes of study. For example Lakeside University (name changed to protect anonymity), where this research was conducted, was using the VITAE researcher development framework ([www.vitae.ac.uk/effectiveresearcher](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/effectiveresearcher)) for all doctoral students. The Vitae framework was developed through extensive research and consultation and was designed to help doctoral researchers reflect and plan their study and subsequent careers through using a matrix of research attributes characterised by 63 descriptors, with evaluative research finding that ‘it can provide a meaningful structure to an otherwise complex and potential chaotic activity’ (Bray and Boon 2011, 113). What seemed to be missing from the VITAE framework, however, was the blending of research and practice, an essential and distinguishing part of professional doctorates as described above. In response to this we recently developed the RPDF as a specific resource to support such students. This innovative framework was empirically derived from an analysis of interviews carried out with EdD students and graduates which explored their specific development needs. The intention was that the RPDF would be a more suitable tool to support the development of such students as they move from being *working* professionals to becoming *researching* professionals (Lindsay, Kerawalla, and Floyd 2017, 13).

The RPDF and the supporting online resource were made available to part-time doctoral students as they progressed through the first year of their EdD programme at a research-led English University. This article reports on the longitudinal study which was undertaken to explore their perceptions and experiences of using the framework. Specifically, we aim to address the following research questions:

- What are part-time doctoral students' perceptions and experiences of using an online supplementary resource, the Researching Professional Development Framework (RPDF)?
- How does using the RPDF help them to reflect on their identities and changes in interrelationships as they shift from seeing themselves as working professionals to becoming *researching professionals*?

Following this introduction, we provide some context to the RPDF and outline its theoretical and empirical basis. Next, we outline the article's theoretical framework. We then discuss the methodological choices taken and present our findings and analysis. Finally, we discuss these findings and highlight some of the implications for practice.

### **The Researching Professional Development Framework in Context**

The RPDF has been developed over the last three years as an online resource for EdD students at Lakeside University. The framework is not a formal teaching resource; instead it offers EdD students an opportunity to reflect on key areas of their professional development as they progress through their studies. They do this by drawing upon the descriptions of experiences provided by other EdD students and graduates and use their reflections on these to generate their own Researching Professional Development Plan for the forthcoming year. The framework draws on a model developed by one of the authors to reflect the learning of fellow professionals (Lindsay 2013, 2016). That model and the current framework are based on three dimensions of learning: cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal (Illeris 2009, Kegan 2009).

The content of the framework was informed by an analysis of interviews with current and past EdD students which explored their specific development needs. To develop the

resource a rigorous and iterative thematic analysis of the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006) was undertaken by two researchers. The first researcher adopted a deductive approach based on the three dimensions of learning mentioned above and the second researcher adopted an inductive approach based solely on what interviewees said, thus following the dual approach to coding described by Hamm and Faircloth (2005). Over 150 codes were initially generated which were then reviewed and reduced to 42. A second round of coding ensured the final analysis was comprehensive with no overlap in the codes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The descriptors for the three sectors and nine areas were chosen to reflect the content in each.

An EdD student can click on each of the nine areas of development in the framework (see figure 1) to reveal interviewee responses and quotes and a list of questions to encourage self-reflection. EdD students are then encouraged to draw up their own development plans (see figure 2).





Figure 1 - The Researching Professional Development Framework (RPDF)

Working as a researcher	DEVELOPING RESEARCH AND STUDY SKILLS	BLENDING THEORY AND PRACTICE	BUILDING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS
			
Developing ways of thinking	REFLECTING ON THEORY AND PRACTICE	BUILDING YOUR RESILIENCE	DEVELOPING YOUR IDENTITY
			
Moving on with your research	ENGAGING WITH NEW OPPORTUNITIES	DISSEMINATING YOUR RESEARCH	MAKING A DIFFERENCE
			

Figure 2 - A blank RPDF plan

The framework and plan were made available to all Year one EdD students who started in May 2016 at LakesideUniversity (and their supervisors) and some of those students volunteered to take part in a programme of research exploring the use and value of the framework during their first year of study.

## Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, our work draws on theories of social identity (Simon 2004, Burke and Stets 2009, Lawler 2014, Jenkins 2014) which suggest that people have multiple identities which are heavily influenced by social interaction. More specifically, we draw on the notion of academic identity-trajectory proposed by McAlpine *et al.* (see, for example, McAlpine 2012, McAlpine and Lucas 2011, McAlpine *et al.* 2012). Academic identity-trajectory links students' personal and professional experiences to help form biographical views of academic identity formation, maintenance and change:

‘individually distinct past experiences and emotions influence present intentions, emotions and engagement in doctoral work as well as future imagined possibilities...’

(McAlpine *et al.* 2012, 511). Parallel research has explored the possible identities that doctoral researchers have to develop and integrate, for example teacher, practitioner and researcher (Kovalcikiene and Buksnyte-Marmiene 2015) and learner, leader and action researcher (Zambo, Buss, and Zambo 2015). This thinking links to adjacent work in organisation studies exploring career trajectories. For example, Chen (1998) argues that a person's career is determined by a wide range of influences over time and cannot be viewed as separate from a person's life experiences. As with career trajectories, academic identity-trajectory cannot be studied in isolation without considering key personal and social influences over a person's lifetime. This framework has also been applied to academic careers to explain some of the key 'turning points' that lead to changes in an individual's trajectory during their professional life (Floyd 2012, 273):

...it is impossible to fully understand an academic's career decisions without exploring the nexus and interrelationships between their personal and professional identities, manifested through different socialization experiences over time.

These interrelationships are also integral to help us understand the transition that EdD students go through while studying for their doctorate: how they move from being a *working* professional to becoming a *researching* professional as they progress through their doctoral research journey while continuing to work full time. Their distance learning context contrasts with the 'daily interactions' experienced by full-time PhD students as they develop their academic identities (Alexander, Harris-Huemmert, and McAlpine 2014, 163). These authors' research in this immersive context explores the value of tools such as the keeping of journals to 'stimulate reflexivity or active critical reflection' (164), and the extent to which their interventions prompted behavioural changes such as one student realising they 'were a bit too solitary at times' (169) and

needed to interact more with others. Despite the continual contact and planned interventions in this full time study context there is still recognition of the ‘peaks and troughs of challenge and resolution’ (Alexander, Harris-Huemmert and McAlpine 2014, 163).

Another common theme in this field of research exploring PhD journeys is that students need to be proactive: that they need to demonstrate agency in their approach to their studies. ‘Agency, resourcefulness and independence of the individual’ are described as being the core of doctoral endeavours by McAlpine (2012, 38) who also emphasises the importance of students being encouraged at an early stage to develop wider academic networks so they can begin to envision their possible futures. Kovalcikiene and Buksnyte-Marmiene (2015, 2694) caution that interventions ‘cannot focus on doctoral students’ behavioural changes without focus on internalized professional identity’, which once again serves to emphasise the co-relationship between agency and identity within this process.

Meanwhile in their research with part-time distance learning professional doctorate students based in Canada, Koole and Stack (2016) explored the impact of the doctoral journey on students’ relationships with family, friends, co-workers and the academic world. They found that the increased isolation and disconnection of distance learners could be compounded by issues with other relationships. Some participants reported that among their co-workers they experienced ‘isolation and unpopularity if their doctoral student status was perceived as threatening’ (49). Some found their studies could isolate them from their friends so that they now sought to ‘avoid boring or demeaning their listeners’ (48). In the multidimensional situations faced by part-time students, Koole and Stack (2016, 43) describe identity as being ‘co-constructed through

dialog embedded within a context of relationships'. They refer to students having 'oscillating feelings of confidence, acceptance and belonging – both intellectually and socially' (42). It would seem that the peaks and troughs experienced by distance learning students could have even more dimensions than those experienced by full-time students. Burnard, Dragovic and Ottewell (2018, 44) refer to the unique position of the EdD student; moving from being a 'knowledgeable practitioner to the place of not knowing can be both exciting and painful'. They comment that 'the outcomes of ongoing reflexive self-interrogation may be uncomfortable, personally, professionally, culturally and methodologically' (41). This is a complex world where a sense of identity is being constantly created and disturbed and those undertaking professional doctorates need assistance as they navigate the journey.

This current research offers an original contribution to the literature by extending previous understandings of doctoral work through looking at the impact of a planned intervention in a distance learning professional doctorate environment, and by exploring the nexus of interrelationships students need to build in this context. It is hoped that applying the above mentioned theoretical framework, and using a longitudinal research approach, will give rise to a more nuanced appreciation of how EdD students understand their developing academic identities and how they might use the RPDF on their journey to become *researching professionals*.

## **Methods**

To address our research questions, the study was undertaken from an interpretive perspective, in line with social constructivism. Within this paradigm, we used a two-stage, longitudinal research design. In stage one, following their initial exposure to the RPDF brief questionnaires were completed by EdD students and their supervisors. This

stage was to check that there was enough support for the RPDF from students and supervisors to move on to stage two of the research which only involved the students (as they were the focus of this programme of research). In stage two, participants were interviewed at three key stages of their EdD year (beginning, middle and end).

### ***Participants***

The population sample began their EdD in May 2016 and volunteers for the research project were sought in June. While all year one students (n=19) had access to the framework and had been invited to engage with it, six of the cohort (and the supervisors and co supervisors of those students) were recruited to the programme of research. The aim was to involve students who, between them, best represented the subject range, geographical coverage and gender mix of the cohort. Out of 10 students who volunteered to take part, six were chosen who best reflected the range of different subject areas of the programme (for example, leadership and management, language and literacy, technology enhanced learning). Four were based in the UK and two outside the UK (the cohort figures were 15 and four). Although our ideal participant selection would have included men and women, all six participants were women, there being only two men in the cohort of 19 with neither volunteering. All those participating, and indeed all the cohort, were mid-career.

### ***Research Process***

#### ***Stage one***

In stage one, the six participants were asked to engage with the framework and plan after completing their first progress report (which consists of a detailed research proposal), but before an annual residential weekend in early July. They were then

encouraged to discuss the framework and their plans with their supervisors during the residential school. Following this, students and supervisors were asked to complete a questionnaire to evaluate their initial reaction to the RPDF.

The student and supervisor questionnaires included 10 questions. Most questions were directly comparable across the two questionnaires but some related specifically to students or supervisors. All were asked whether the framework made sense to them, was it discussed at the residential weekend, did it add value, and did it result in students raising issues they would not otherwise have considered. Feedback was sought on whether, and if so how, students or supervisors thought the resource could be enhanced. Finally, all participants were asked to comment on the potential value of the RPDF. All 6 students completed and returned the questionnaire as did 5 of their supervisors and 4 of their co supervisors. At least one of each student's supervisors responded. The purpose of stage one was to ensure that the RPDF was seen as a helpful intervention and that it was appropriate to move on to stage two. Overall the students and supervisors gave positive feedback about the framework and so we progressed to the next stage of the study.

### *Stage Two*

In stage two, three longitudinal qualitative interviews were arranged with each of the students. They took place in November, March and June to avoid course related deadlines and were carried out using Skype (with the interviewees using Skype or phone). The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcripts shared with the participants for them to amend if they wished. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Whilst the interviews inevitably covered the progress being made by students in their

research, the interviewer took care not to get involved in any matters relating to a student's supervision.

The interview schedules are shown at tables 1-3. As can be seen, similar questions were asked in the first two interviews. In the final interview the questions were changed so that the focus was solely on the impact and influence of the RPDF framework and plan.

Table 1 - Interview 1 Schedule

Interview 1
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. In connection with the RPDF, what did you discuss with your supervisor at the residential school?</li><li>2. Can you please talk me through the content of your plan?<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. working as a researcher</li><li>b. developing ways of thinking</li><li>c. moving on with your research</li></ol></li><li>3. How much chance have you had to act on any of your plans yet?</li><li>4. Have you identified any areas of development activity that are not covered by the RPDF and plan?</li><li>5. Has your workplace been supportive of your development needs (e.g. communicating your research to others)?</li><li>6. Has the plan featured in any of your discussions with your supervisors following the year one residential school?</li><li>7. Any other comments?</li></ol>

Table 2 - Interview 2 Schedule

Interview 2
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What do you think of the RPDF overall?</li><li>2. Has it been valuable to you? In what way?</li><li>3. Can we talk about how your plan has had an impact on you.....<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. working as a researcher</li><li>b. developing ways of thinking</li><li>c. moving on with your research</li></ol></li><li>4. Has the plan prompted you to carry out activities that you would not otherwise have considered?</li><li>5. Have you recently discussed your RPDF with your supervisor?</li></ol>

6. Do you have suggestions about how the RPDF process might be improved?
7. Do you have suggestions for how the RPDF online resource might be improved?
8. Any other comments?

Table 3 - Interview 3 Schedule

Interview 3	
1.	In what ways has the framework and your own development plan influenced: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. how you have carried out your research?</li> <li>b. how you have carried out your professional role?</li> <li>c. how you have blended your role as a researching professional with your professional role?</li> <li>d. how your colleagues in your professional role perceive you?</li> <li>e. how you perceive yourself?</li> <li>f. your relationship with your supervisor?</li> <li>g. how you developed your support network as a researching professional?</li> <li>h. how you developed contacts in your area of research?</li> <li>i. any involvement you have had in research-related communities?</li> </ol>
2.	Has your work environment and culture been a help or a hindrance to you in trying to develop as a professional researcher? What agency do you feel you have in trying to change the structures in which you work to help you develop as a professional researcher? Has the framework helped you in this regard?
3.	Has the plan prompted you to carry out activities that you would not otherwise have considered? If so, what are these and how did the framework influence these?
4.	Do you have suggestions about how the RPDF process might be improved?
5.	Do you have suggestions for how the RPDF online resource might be improved?
6.	Do you plan to use the framework as you continue your research?
7.	Any other comments?

## ***Analysis***

The interview data were analysed using established thematic analysis techniques outlined by Lichtman (2013) and Bryman (2012). This involved reading and coding each transcript, merging and reflecting on these codes to form larger categories and emerging conceptual themes, and then further analysing these themes by comparing and



contrasting them across the data sets and to the study's conceptual framework. The codes and themes relevant to the research questions considered in this article were then grouped together to frame the analysis and discussion which follow, as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Example of thematic analysis

Codes	Themes	Related Concepts
Value of quotations Keeping a journal Having a plan Encouraging confidence and resilience	Benefits of the RPDF	<b>Early intervention</b> (McAlpine, 2012) <b>Experiencing peaks and troughs</b> (Alexander <i>et al.</i> , 2014; Koole and Stack, 2016)
Looking to the future Establishing networks Engaging with the wider academic community	Widening horizons	<b>Future imagined possibilities</b> (McAlpine <i>et al.</i> , 2012)
Changing identities Balancing worker and researcher identities Maintaining relationships	Becoming a researching professional	<b>Identity-trajectory</b> (Chen, 1998; McAlpine, 2012)

### ***Ethical considerations***

The study adhered to published ethical principles for educational research (BERA 2011). Prior to data collection, a full application was made to the Lakeside University Ethics Committee. Following ethical approval being granted, all participants were given an information sheet which set out the aims of the project and highlighted key ethical concerns such as informed consent and anonymity. In addition, all interviewees were asked to sign a consent form beforehand, agreeing to the interviews and for them to be audio recorded. Finally, any identifying characteristics or context have been excluded from this report to protect the identity of participants.

## **Findings**

As mentioned above the findings have been grouped into themes relating to the two research questions addressed in this article.

### ***Perceptions and experiences of using the RPDF***

This first research question explores the doctoral students' perceptions and experiences of using the RPDF as a resource to supplement the year one programme. The students found the resource of immediate value at the start of their studies in a variety of ways. They were reassured to find that their feelings of trepidation were by no means unique, that other students had expressed similar concerns and that they should expect to experience peaks and troughs in their research experience, as the following quotes illustrate:

It helped me to think more broadly about the skills and attitudes I need to bring to the EdD. (Debbie)

It gave me insight from the students' comments that it is a very up and down journey and it is okay to not know what you are doing and have times of self-doubt. (Fiona)

Seeing the experience of other students helped me identify where my difficulties might lie. (Carla)

There were a couple of questions/anxieties in my mind that I thought were unique to me, but they're not! (Eugenie)

The students later explained how drawing up their own RPDF plans had helped them organise their studies. Several mentioned they had their plans stuck on their walls. Others found it helped to look back at their plans and see how much they had achieved. Their plans provided a focus and helped students consider ideas at the beginning that

they would not have otherwise thought of as part of doctoral study. It also helped provide a framework for these distance learning part-time students. As Carla explained:

Work I've done before has been nothing like this so, with the framework, I have at least had something that I feel that I'm hanging my work onto, as opposed to writing into empty air. Because we're working on our own, we're away, it gives us something to hold onto. I feel like it's the scaffolding.

Barbara added how helpful she had found her plan:

I have a printout which I stick on my desk wall, and I just write notes as and when I complete it.

Barbara's plan included an ongoing action to celebrate her achievements no matter how small. This was an example of how the plan had encouraged students to identify clear objectives.

Reading about other students' experiences also helped give the novice researchers confidence as Eugenie described:

I think that I wouldn't have dared to have a page or sign in on ResearchGate because I'm not so confident as a person. The framework has made me think about other listings also. Otherwise I would be hiding, I think, and shy in a corner and wouldn't talk about my research until I have my results.

Several students mentioned how the framework and plan had helped with their resilience. For example, Anne described how she had used it as a 'crutch':

[The framework's] been a sort of psychological crutch that I'm not on my own floundering around with my research questions and stuff. That this is sort of normal. Otherwise I think I might be panicking.

She elaborated on this later:

There have been moments where, to be honest, you feel a little bit out on a limb. I

mean geographically, even, I suppose I'm out on a limb. But it's nice to go back and know I'm not the only one that feels this.

One of the quotes from former students had mentioned the value of keeping a reflective diary and three of the students in the pilot decided they would keep journals. Carla described this in some detail:

I keep my journal going at all times and there was something about reflection becoming a habit in that section [of the framework]. And so, I've gone OK this is what I need to be doing. And sometimes when I feel at the end of the week I really haven't done much doctorate work I can sit and do some reflection on the things I've been thinking about during the week: those thoughts that come to you in the shower, the thoughts that come to you on your journey to work and home from work. So just, you know, thinking about thinking. I treated myself to a decent fountain pen and a really nice Italian journal, so it's a pleasure to do it.

Eugenie also mentioned how the framework had encouraged her to think iteratively:

I think that the framework also helped me because it's a circle. You can begin from every part of the circle. So, engaging with new opportunities is not the final part, but it's also essential with the other parts in the circle.

Finally, the framework had prompted students to think about their possible futures after they completed their studies. Fiona returned to this aspect several times during her interviews:

I think it was really good at the beginning of my research just to think about this. For example, I'd never thought about disseminating my research, hadn't even thought about it. You don't think about three and a half years later 'Oh what am I going to do with it?' You're just trying to get through it.

It also helped Debbie realise what she could be doing now to help achieve her future goals:

What I'm really interested in is developing my writing and opportunities to present. That's something I've always wanted to do. And for me this framework helped at a really early stage for me to think about not doing it right now, but the kinds of things I could be doing throughout the process to lead in that direction.

### ***Becoming researching professionals***

The second research question explores how the RPDF helped students to reflect on their identities and changes in interrelationships: in particular their potential evolution from being a working professional to becoming a *researching* professional. The findings in this section show how the framework prompted them to reflect on how their identities might be changing and how their research might impact on their relationships with work colleagues, with other academics and with their friends.

While the students found value in the section in the framework on 'working as a researcher', it was through the other two sections, 'developing ways of thinking' and 'moving on with your research', that the students realised the breadth and potential of their endeavours and, from that, the impact their research could have on their identities and the impact they could have through their interrelationships.

In an early interview, Carla's response epitomised the students' increasing awareness of the concept of identity. She commented:

'Developing my Identity' is something I am only just starting to grapple with. Not only do I need to develop my criticality, but I need to be aware of my own stand in the world, my principles and underpinning beliefs when reading and writing.

And in her final interview she reflected further on her development:

What I found was that the plan when I started, and the framework when I started, really helped me put together what my research might look like. It really helped me

in the beginning when I was very confused, very bewildered, thinking will I ever manage this, that I had a framework to put together. But as the year has gone on, I've looked back at the framework from time to time and it's more about developing me as a researcher as a whole which has been valuable.

Fiona too had found the framework helped her think more holistically about her studies:

The developing your identity I thought was quite interesting where it was the whole thing about building confidence. Doing this course is multi-faceted isn't it? And I think this whole model here shows how multifaceted it is. It's not just about getting an academic qualification. It's developing yourself as a researcher and developing skills for life.

Debbie also felt the framework had helped change how she perceived herself:

As the year has gone on, I've been able to feel that I have a little bit more gravitas. I feel more like a researcher as opposed to somebody with a skill inputting into an otherwise successful research team and I've certainly grown and developed. Now the areas of the plan were about engaging with new opportunities. That was just taking an opportunity in both hands to get involved in other research around the university and to feel more as a researcher in my own right and less just a research assistant on a team.

Students' relationships with their work colleagues appeared to be very important. For example, Carla commented on how she felt her identity in the workplace had changed:

I don't see myself as a student anymore. I see myself as a researcher and I think that's quite a shift for me. I think because it's so combined with my work I see it as part of my professional identity and now that professional identity has a research strand to it, rather than I've got my job and I'm doing an EdD on the side. Now I see myself as a teacher primarily, a teacher of teachers and a teacher of undergraduates, but I also see myself as a researcher in my own right and somebody supporting research going into schools and saying, 'Are you doing anything interesting or creative, would you like help writing it up?' [From the

framework] I came out with this idea of myself and my background as actually being an essential part of my research persona.

As the year progressed, all the students talked about how their experiences and relationships at work were changing. Fiona described how she was now much more challenging about the rigour of any evidence presented to her and Eugenie how because of the framework she felt she was more precise, more critical and more organised. Carla had actively sought out supportive relationships with colleagues because she had identified this as an action on her initial RPDF plan. Following her move to a new organisation Debbie commented:

I have actively sought out in my organisation supportive relationships. I had that on my plan at the beginning so I identified one or two colleagues at my new place of work and thought they may be able to signpost me to other useful relationships.

Finally, Anne mentioned her pleasure at the reaction of colleagues:

They've always been ever so welcoming, but I think, as I say, I think they're surprised, but I think they're pleasantly surprised and it perhaps is changing my identity with the group slightly, or perhaps even more than slightly, actually.

Several students mentioned how they were developing relationships with academics in other universities, an area of activity they said they would not have previously considered. Barbara was prompted to do this by her RPDF plan:

So I have some objectives that I wrote. To make some new connections with people in my field of research. And I've been building up some.

Debbie explained how the framework had helped her to realise this was a possibility:

One of the biggest things about this was identifying that, whilst you're doing your study, there are still opportunities to share your research and get involved in that

research community, not just in this University but elsewhere, and so as a result of that I have actively looked for opportunities to do that.

Two of the students volunteered that their doctoral studies were affecting their relationships with their friends. Fiona commented that her friends did not know what a doctorate was and she felt diffident talking about it.

I've never really considered myself academic. And so even now I think, 'Oh am I really doing a doctorate?' And sometimes I don't tell people that I'm doing it actually. I just think, 'Oh I'll pass this first year then I'll tell people'.

The second student who talked about this was Carla who described how she found her doctoral studies an isolating experience:

So what I find difficult is talking about my research in my social circle. Because when my friends first knew me I was a teacher so I used to be able to tell [stories about teaching] and it was all very funny and very amusing. But if I try and talk about my research they're like, 'Oh that doesn't sound very funny or entertaining or interesting'. So that side of things is massively socially isolating. They're not used to me being intense or serious, I suppose. And I need to talk, so when I want to talk about my research I've got a very limited group of people I can do that with. I've got the friends from the cohort.

## **Discussion**

### ***Perceptions and experiences of using the RPDF***

The students found it immensely valuable to read the quotes from previous students. They helped them realise it was normal for doctoral research to be a 'very up and down journey', for it to have the peaks and troughs identified by Alexander *et al.* (2014). The students found that drawing up a plan had helped them deal with uncertainty with one describing the plan she drew up as her 'scaffolding'. Again, as found by Alexander *et al.* (2014), having a planned intervention that prompted them to reflect had proved



beneficial.

Students described how their plans had helped them develop confidence and resilience. One described the framework as a ‘psychological crutch’. The comment from a previous student had led to several students starting to keep a journal, not least to prompt ‘thinking about thinking’. The framework had also prompted them to carry out activities they would not have envisaged, including developing academic links outside the University. One had been encouraged to join research networks rather than ‘hiding, shy in a corner’ a similar experience to the student who had felt ‘a bit solitary at times’ (Alexander, Harris-Huemmert and McAlpine 2014, 169). These findings resonate with McAlpine’s (2012) previous findings which suggest that students should be encouraged at an early stage to develop their wider academic networks.

The plan also helped students think about what might happen ‘three and a half years later’ and encouraged them to take actions at the start of their studies that would help them achieve their hoped for goals, so prompting them to think about their ‘future imagined possibilities’ (McAlpine *et al.* 2012, 511).

What this research has shown is the power of encouraging students to think more broadly, of encouraging them to consider at an early stage of their research topics that would not otherwise have occurred to them. In the time-poor environment of part-time professional doctoral researchers, the natural instinct is to focus on the tasks that need to be done, on the urgent while sometimes neglecting the important. The RPDF has given profile to some of those activities that are important in the longer term. The hope is that, by encouraging them to envision their possible futures, students will be more likely to make a difference through their current and future research activities after they graduate.

### ***Becoming researching professionals***

One student unwittingly provided a very helpful link from the first research question to the second by commenting that at the beginning the plan had really helped her when she was ‘very confused, very bewildered’ but later she realised it was the fact it was developing her ‘as a researcher as a whole’ that she valued. In line with the process outlined by Kovalcikiene and Buksnyte-Marmiene (2015) changing her behaviour was in turn helping her internalise changes to her identity. A second student’s realisation, prompted by the framework, that her studies were not just about getting a qualification but about helping her develop ‘skills for life’ demonstrates the increasing awareness about identity-trajectories described by McAlpine (2012). Another student talked about how she now saw herself ‘as a teacher primarily but I also see myself as a researcher in my own right’, thus reflecting the need to manage multiple identities mentioned by Kovalcikiene and Buksnyte-Marmiene (2015) and Zambo, Buss and Zambo (2015).

In the interviews the students reflected on their relationships with colleagues, with other academics and their social relationships. Unlike the students mentioned by Koole and Stack (2016) none of the students interviewed mentioned any problems with their co-workers. Indeed, their experiences during the first year of their study seemed very positive in this respect. ‘Blending theory and practice’ was a key element in the framework and students had been specifically encouraged to talk to work colleagues about their research. In their responses they referred to how they had done so, but it is too early to suggest what impact this may have had. What was encouraging were the insights from students that they felt they were becoming more confident with more enquiring and more critical minds. This would seem to be the beginnings of agency and resourcefulness leading to the increased independence of thought valued by McAlpine (2012).

Although, in general, experiences with co-workers differed from those described by Koole and Stack (2016), two of the students did talk about their social relationships in terms which reflected the earlier research. One was reluctant to tell friends about her studies. The other found it ‘socially isolating’ – only really being able to talk about her research with her student cohort. The comments resonate with the ‘oscillating feelings of confidence, acceptance and belonging, both intellectually and socially’ described by Koole and Stack (2016, 42) in their research in a similar distance learning environment.

The data from our study show how much students reflected on the concept of identity once their attention was drawn to it. Their involvement with the RPDF had made them realise from an early stage that they were likely to have ups and downs in their research, and that it was normal to do so. Our findings also show the increased agency that students felt when using the RPDF and that this grew further the more they used it. Once their attention was drawn to the possibility of developing new relationships, their comments show that they were then keen to do so. They also began to attempt tasks that were outside their comfort zone because they could see that other students had succeeded by doing so. These were individuals who realised that to succeed they needed to make things happen and, to the extent that their still developing research-related skills permitted, to take responsibility for their personal development.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study inevitably has limitations. The framework has only been used at one University by a subset of the EdD researchers in the first year of their studies. It was used as a complementary resource rather than as a formal part of their studies and we do not yet have any data on any long-term benefits of the RPDF. However, within this context and subject to these limitations, the part-time doctoral students’ perceptions and

experiences of using the supplementary RPDF resource were overwhelmingly positive. They particularly valued the early introduction to the wider aspects of development and found the comments from former students both helpful and reassuring. The concepts of developing their identity and developing their wider research networks would not have occurred without the framework. Following the pilot exercise with year one students, LakesideUniversity has now integrated the RPDF into its EdD programme in a way that aims to benefit both EdD students and their supervisors.

As well as giving students the structure and comfort of a plan, the framework also prompted them to reflect on how their identities and interrelationships might be changing now and what might be their imagined possible futures. A further development at LakesideUniversity could be to introduce alongside the RPDF an orientation session as described by Koole and Stark (2016) where students could discuss at an early stage how friends, family and co-workers might react to the learner's new academic world. At the very least some quotes from former students about this aspect could be sought and added to the framework. The three-dimensional learning model underpinning the RPDF is generic. Other universities could develop equivalent resources, tailored to their contexts and including quotations from their former students.

Meanwhile LakesideUniversity now chooses to describe its doctoral students as doctoral *researchers*. This change in nomenclature immediately enhances how they view themselves and has helped emphasise that they are on an identity-changing journey from being *working* professionals to becoming *researching* professionals.

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